

Washington, D.C. – Yesterday, Greg Murray of Bainbridge testified at a Congressional hearing on the impact of the recent salmonella outbreak on the Georgia Tomato Industry and Georgia Agriculture. The hearing, hosted by the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture of which Congressman Sanford Bishop is a member, covered several food safety-related topics, including shortcomings within the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that initially suggested tomatoes were the cause of the deadly outbreak. The outbreak, which eventually was linked to Mexican-grown jalapeño peppers, cost Georgia tomato farmers an estimated \$13.9 million.

“In 25 years of growing tomatoes, our farm has experienced floods, hail storms, freezes, droughts, poor yields, poor markets, disease and insect infestations and many other difficulties,” testified Murray, who farms more than 80 acres of tomatoes each year. “But the one thing we have never had to face was a public hysteria attack caused by the media and agencies of the federal government. No amount of planning could have prepared us for what we faced this June as we started harvesting our spring crop of tomatoes.”

Murray, who termed last summer’s recall the “false food safety awareness fiasco,” contributed testimony about his own experience, pointing out certain aspects of the situation which prolonged and worsened effects on Georgia’s tomato farmers.

“Each day the CDC and FDA were announcing more salmonella cases had been reported. The messages were confusing,” said Murray. “Consumers could not understand the reported salmonella cases were from product consumed three to five weeks ago, not product currently on the market. So the safest thing for a consumer, or a food outlet was to just not purchase or consume tomatoes.”

Murray also made several recommendations to the panel on preventing another “fiasco” in the future, including institution of a food safety program that considers regional production differences and product risk levels, and a plan of action that demands state and federal agencies work together with the agriculture and food industry on future responses. He also asked for partial compensation for growers and shippers who suffered financially during salmonella scare through no fault of their own.

Following today’s hearing, the Committee hopes to begin the process of examining FDA’s current food safety guidelines. In particular, the Committee will focus on how, during outbreaks of food-borne illness, potential sources of contamination can be narrowed to prevent more financially devastating false-alarm recalls.

Meanwhile, Congressman Bishop this week formally asked House leadership to consider providing \$100 million to cover crop losses resulting from what many believe was the FDA’s

mishandling of the salmonella outbreak.

“We cannot have another summer like the past one. As long as this country produces a domestic supply of food and fiber, we will have incidences of contamination every now and then. But we cannot and must not allow those relatively rare situations to affect entire unrelated industries ever again,” said Congressman Bishop.